

Matthew 28: 14-20
Creekside COB
May 18, 2008

The Trinity

Over the next twenty minutes I am going to bore you silly. I don't want to be boring. The greatest sin a preacher can commit is to bore people with the gospel, and I do not want to be held accountable for the sin of boredom. It will be hard because some of you were well on your way to boredom before I said a word. All it took was a look at the sermon title -- The Trinity.

In the ecumenical calendar, the Sunday after Pentecost is Trinity Sunday. Preachers call it, "bite-off-more-than-you-can-chew" Sunday. There is no Christian doctrine more perplexing to people outside the faith as the Trinity. There is no Christian doctrine more perplexing to people *inside* the faith as the Trinity. It has been the cause of heresy and debate and division throughout the history of the church. Theologians have grappled with how God can be three distinct persons or entities and yet be one. Our Jewish cousins scratch their heads when we say we believe in one God and yet talk like polytheists with language about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is complex and cannot be contained by logic. It is thick and dense and can't be cut into bite-sized, easily digestible, understandable pieces. Winston Churchill described Russia as, "*a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.*" The same can be said about our ability to comprehend the Trinity. The New Testament scholar Robert Capon said that when humans talk about the mystery of God's Trinity, we are like, *a bunch of oysters trying to describe a ballerina.*

God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and God is one. God is the Creator, the Redeemer, and Sustainer, and God is one. It is not a mathematical equation where Father + Son + Holy Spirit = God. The doctrine of the Trinity says there are three distinguishable

persons that comprise the totality of who God is and what God does and that God is one.

It is no wonder that preachers opt for different themes to address. It is no wonder we are satisfied to leave the “Trinity talk” to the theologians and religious philosophers. Let them wrestle with it and report back when they arrive at something we can grasp

Our difficulty with the Trinity tempts us to either leave it alone, or focus on one aspect of it. The Presbyterians focus on the sovereignty of God and his Lordship of all creation. The Church of the Brethren puts the emphasis upon the Jesus the Son and living in harmony with how he lived. We use Trinitarian language sparingly, except when we baptize new believers in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Pentecostals emphasize the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the power and passion it inspires.

The Trinity is *one tough doctrine* that either causes us to leave it to the experts, pick one aspect and forget the others, or, as I suspect is the case with most of us, causes us to dismiss the Trinity as a doctrine that no longer serves us.

The word, “Trinity” does not appear in scripture. It is a product of the early church. It is the church’s best attempt at thinking about our experience of God. Someone said, “The Trinity is putting words to our experience of God’s love.” It was not given to frustrate us, or confound us, or bore us. The doctrine of the Trinity attempts to explain the mystery of God and the unlimited ways we experience God’s presence.

We have to fight the temptation of thinking it is “too big to bother.” We have to resist the idea that if it can’t be condensed into something manageable, or it doesn’t fold out into a bed, then it has no useful purpose

When we talk this way, it has much more to do with us than God. If I understand it correctly, Christianity does not try to whittle God’s big picture down to size. It elevates our thinking to see more of God’s big picture and our place in it.

Jesus elevated the disciple's thinking. He expanded their perspective. He widened their spiritual horizon. After the resurrection Jesus met the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, and there he handed them their position descriptions. We call it the Great Commission. He said that the authority of heaven and earth had been given to him to do with as God pleased. *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations."* This was Jesus' version of "Be fruitful and multiply." He said, *"Baptize people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach them to observe my commandments, and remember -- I am with you always."*

Jesus gave the assignment, the means to accomplish it, *and* the promise that at no time or place would they be apart from his love.

So what does this tell us about the Trinity? First, it shows that we are the offspring of an extravagant God who goes overboard with everything.

How many species of BIRDS do you suppose there are in the world? There are at least 10,000, and South American is home to 3,200 of them. Did you know there are 22,000 species of ORCHIDS? How many BEETLE species are there? Don't say, "Just four named John, Paul, George, and Ringo." There are 300,000 species of beetles in 500 families, and entomologists say there are thousands yet to be discovered. It seems rather excessive.

The Earth occupies a tiny part of the Milky Way galaxy. Our galaxy is 100,000 light years across and contains 100 billion stars. God wasn't content with one galaxy. (SHOW HUBBLE PICTURE) This picture from the Hubble telescope is our deepest view into the universe. One galaxy wasn't enough for God. So how many are there? Computer models have calculated there are 500 billion galaxies—give or take several billion. Staggering!

God apparently thought that humanity in one skin tone was boring, so God turned people out in "red and yellow, black, and

white with all sorts of hues in between, and all are precious in his sight.” We could have gotten along with one gospel. Matthew would work fine at telling Jesus’ story. But God said, *“Why have just one? Here’s Mark, Luke, and John.* Questions are raised in the Gospels like, “How many times should we forgive others? Seven times? *“No -- make it seventy times seven... for starters.”* And God went overboard by giving himself three names!

The Trinity reveals a God who does things in excess. The Trinity also reveals a God who insists upon relationship. An expression making the rounds in church circles is, “It’s not about you.” Life is not about your wants, your desires, or your dreams. Worship is not about having your needs met. In the body of Christ we do not insist on getting our own way, nor do we pout or refuse to participate if decisions don’t go our way. The consideration behind every decision is ultimately not, “How will it benefit me?” but “How will it help others?”

Life is “not about us” because it’s “all about God.” God created us for relationship. As Paul said in 1st Corinthians, “You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.” (12:27) We can’t be Christians by ourselves. It is not like taking flying lessons so you can get enough hours to fly solo. Will Willimon says, “One of the most profound things the church asks Christians to do is to be in community with people you did not know before you joined Jesus’ church, and people who, when you get to know them, you don’t particularly like.”

God is one, but God is a community of Father, Son, and Spirit. This relationship extends to us as members of his body and it is our job to grow the body-- forming new relationships by going into the world and making disciples of all the nations.”

Music is made by playing notes, but notes alone do not make music. Let’s say that Marilee is at the piano playing the base line of a familiar hymn. By itself you probably wouldn’t recognize it. If the harmonies were played separately, they wouldn’t register. A hymn is made of separate components, each one different from the other. It isn’t until all the components are played plainly, distinctly, and at once that we hear, *“Amazing Grace.”*

Creator. Redeemer. Sustainer. Each is a different aspect, working in relationship to reveal one God. Sam, Saddle, and Sal. Each is a different person expressing that personhood in different ways. Each is called out of their solitary lives to be one body in Jesus to do his bidding. It is the gift of the Trinity to put us in relationship and invite others to join up.

Our minds cannot plumb the depths of the Trinity. Doctrines are attempts at getting a handle on mysteries, but mysteries defy being understood. How can God be his own Son? If Jesus is God, does it mean that when Jesus prayed, he prayed to himself? If God is one, does that mean that when God shows up as Father, that the Son and Spirit must be there too, or can the three work independent of each another? All I can say is, “Don’t ask me!”

Such questions aren’t an aid to understanding. What matters is not that we understand the Trinity, but that we know it when we experience it.

We have experienced God in the earthquake, wind, and fire, and in the silence as well. We have experienced God coming to us on angel wings whispering, “Don’t be afraid. Lift up your head. Up on your feet and walk. Behold, I bring you good news.” We have experienced God as a judge and a shepherd and a father who welcomes us home after we’ve done our thing in far away places.

Experience teaches us that the Trinity comes in ways that outnumber beetle species and far flung galaxies. Barbara Brown Taylor says. “The list would appear to go on forever: God the teacher, the challenger, the helper, the stranger, God the lover, the adversary, the yes, the no.”

Over against all that we don’t know, we do know the Trinity is about extravagance, relationship, and revelation to us, and that, dear people, is never boring.